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The Malady of the Ideal:
 Obermann, Maurice
 de Guérin, and Amiel.
 By Van Wyck Brooks

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VAN WYCK BROOKS



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The Malady of the Ideal

To Carey McWilliams
with kind regards

Van Wyck Brooks

August 1928

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The Malady of the Ideal :
Obermann, Maurice
de Guérin, and Amiel.
By Van Wyck Brooks

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“O Psyche! Psyche! preserve thy good fortune; do not sound the mystery too deeply. Take care not to bring the fearful light near the invisible lover of whom thy soul is enamoured.”—VICTOR COUSIN.

TO
EDWARD SHELDON

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Introduction

FOR a few days we had returned from our wanderings. In the late afternoon we went back to the house we had left at the opening of spring. Still unoccupied, it had kept pace with the inevitable season, and the tangled garden had blossomed into high summer just the same. But how helplessly and in what confusion! The rose bushes—yellow, white, pink, and red—had scrambled into bloom, and the ambitious buds, half-blown and deprived of water, were blasted among the insect-ridden leaves. The crimson fuchsias without assistance were struggling to unroll their purple hearts. The brakes and ferns meanwhile

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were in high feather, and the dandelions and a few wild roses had urged themselves riotously among the gentler growths.

Seldom had we felt so grave and sad a responsibility. We saw plainly how for a little while our own pride and care had given the flowers a false encouragement. With a little eye for order we had thwarted the abounding confusion of nature. We had given our strength to the roses, made of them instruments for asserting our own predominance, and after taking upon ourselves the responsibility of their unnatural splendour we had forsaken them. Then the commonest things, exuberant and blind, had brought back the wilderness. . . . The wilderness—nature's order rather than ours.

Yes! according to some vast system of proportions, some infinite perspective,

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what is chaos to us is a well-ordered detail in some normal arrangement. If nature knows the correct place of everything, to that eye the little order we set up may appear only an irritable attempt to achieve finality where there is and can be no finality.

To perceive in certain disinterested moments this order in the universe is the peculiar office of intuition and of poetry, the outer body of intuition. *Disinterested* moments I say, moments in which a man is able to place himself outside the particular species to which he belongs, to realize that any conception of order he may reach is only a circle within a circle, and that however well proportioned the syllogism may be within itself it is limited as regards the circle beyond it. The perception of the infinite will thus always be of the nature

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of the tangent, which touches every circle successively and passes out beyond them all. A touch of intuition breaks through any consistent circle of ideas, and by appealing to the heart speaks to us of a gigantic and elemental order of things beneath, without, beyond the forms of order by which we seem to live.

Order is as much the ideal of humanity as it is necessarily the law of the nature which includes it. The philosopher and the poet have always endeavoured to reconcile the order of the world with the order of the universe. Filled with a great dream, they have imposed their immense, fluid conception upon a world controlled by practical men whose aim has been to maintain only a microcosm of the true order, self-contained, finite, and temporary. The revolutionary tendency in human nature only shows how

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restless it is under these fixed forms. Whenever there is a revolution philosophy and poetry are in the air, and every revolution results in a wider conception of order, a greater freedom for the individual, a more fluid society.

The great poet is the most disinterested of minds. Profound intuition has made him careless of practical arrangements. Dante in his Vision does not hesitate to take liberties with the established order. He places popes in hell, and without reference to the positions men as a matter of course enjoy in actual society he assigns them now to the lowest circle, now to the outer rim of paradise, now to a place beside the central Heart of things. And all this he does with the utmost calmness and decision, knowing as he does that appearance counts for nothing, and that

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measured by the true virtue he has sketched a new and more fundamental order where every soul, so to speak, has found its level. Bunyan has done the same thing. With him Christian is the touchstone, and just as in actual society we have the *man of the world*, the man who understands the social proportions of every individual he meets, so in Christian we have what might be called the *man of the universe*, who understands the fundamental proportions of everything, measured in this case not by the scale of society, but of the true virtue.

In the life of Shelley we see the unhappy results of an attempt to express the elemental order in terms of the practical order. The life of Shelley will always be a crucial instance, a challenge to society, and an illustration of the paradox upon which it rests. For though

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every candid mind now accords him the purest virtue, what mind can explain why the world makes that virtue impracticable? Antiquated conceptions of order, the reformer would say: but it is very plain that conceptions of order that will prevail in the world during the next thousand years are antiquated already, in advance, in the same fashion. So long as the inner, spiritual, elemental life of the heart by which we attach ourselves to the universal order is in subjection to any outward, practical, finite order—so long shall we be forced to repudiate virtue in the very act of doing homage to it. Who can wonder then that hypocrisy is almost second nature to us, when the whole world is hypocritical without knowing it, and when every step we take in life treads on the thin crust of a gigantic fallacy?

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But how does it happen that we are involved in this fallacy? Why do we perceive one thing and accept another? The truth is, that in its craving for order mankind perpetually overreaches itself, and postpones the fulfilment by snatching at all perversions that appear to bring it within reach. In a widening circle they establish households, towns, states, nations, empires, imperial alliances, endeavouring to bring about by external means the federation of the world. This federation already exists if men would only disarm their hearts. The moment they establish an empire they transfer their allegiance from humanity to this empire and substitute the artificial claim of patriotism for the natural claim of humanity. Who would oppose the utmost reach of social organization so long as it remains purely social? The

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spiritual nature of the individual will never be perfectly free until the collective nature is submerged in an all-embracing routine. But in so far as the social order involves not alone the social, but the spiritual nature of man, it tends to crystallize the human spirit, to imprison it within a complete system of ideas, and to place it in a position of antagonism to the order of the universe. And this outward order *has* hitherto implied a spiritual application, has demanded its tribute from the inner life. It has implied the committing of oneself to something fixed and static,

“Lights that do mislead the dawn.”

Such tributes are patriotism and other forms of what may be called world-pride. And because everything resembling order in the world has been a makeshift, art and literature have sprung from those

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apparently disordered souls who have perceived in chaos itself a glimmering of the true order and have been unable to compromise themselves for the sake of temporary arrangements.

In this dilemma literature finds itself. In literature as in life we are confronted with an interior order and an exterior order, the former being the apprehension of truth, the latter the form in which the writer seeks to convey it. Here too there is a fundamental antagonism, inasmuch as form implies some outward consistency. "It is," says Renan, "an accepted opinion with experienced critics that literature diminishes what it touches, that the finest shades of feeling will be for ever unknown, that the truest and most powerful ideas men have had in the universe have remained unwritten, or rather unexpressed. God and His angels,

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as people used to say, have had the privilege of beholding the only perfect manifestations of moral and intellectual order; that is, of meditations and feelings evolving themselves in the midst of a perfect objectivity, untainted by the underlying thought of their employment."

Perhaps we may say that those who have felt the significance of life most keenly are not the poets and the artists. Goethe speaks somewhere of those men and women, unknown to the public, whom all artists have had as friends and to whom, recognizing in them something superior to their own natures and achievements, they have confessed their debt. These are the natures which have been superior to the compromise involved in expression, which have understood that talent is only one of the instruments in the great symphony of life. Such a

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man was Coleridge, that fragmentary soul whom De Quincey called the greatest of all English intellects. Critics not the most profound have never ceased lamenting the waste of a personality which nevertheless leavened a whole generation. Such was John Sterling, Carlyle's hero, of whom Stuart Mill said, "The mere fact of such a man living and breathing amongst us has an incalculable influence." Such was R. A. M. Stevenson, that mighty talker, the cousin of Louis, whose luminous thoughts passed into so many talents and have reached us refracted like the light of the stars. . . . We may even find that expression brings to the artist a touch of complacency, as if the satisfaction of work well done had a little tarnished the high matter of the soul.

For this reason there is always an element of beautiful untruth in art. It is

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possible with a measure of accuracy to record singly the poignant glimpses of the elemental order: the sharp, clear cry of a true lyric, a brief burden of music, a magical phrase will do this. But these are the only artistic productions which touch the heart with any degree of what can be called elemental truth. This thought led Poe to say that a long poem is impossible. A long poem is in fact made possible only by the use of rhetoric, which may be defined as a form of infidelity by which the writer conveys the impression that he has felt what he has not felt, in order to give his expression the form and consistency demanded by art.

Let us consider the method of the rhetorician side by side with that of the true poet—the rhetorician characterized by an enforced consistency, a trait of the

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outward order, the poet characterized by perfect sincerity, a trait of the inward order. A poet will write whatever seems to him at the moment absolutely true. But in his natural development, in the growth of his perceptions, he will constantly reach deeper and deeper, and what he has discovered one day will be contradicted in him perhaps the day following. Will he hesitate then to contradict himself? Will he force himself against his own sense of truth to give the whole body of his work an outward consistency? This Emerson denied when he said that a sincere man has nothing to do with consistency: "Say what you have to say in plain words even if it contradicts everything you said yesterday." In truth, it is only by this lack of method that a man achieves in his work the only kind of self-accordance possible in the expression of thought—that which

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exists in the personality itself, growing, widening, deepening in its perceptions, but still true to nature because true to itself.

The rhetorician on the other hand has dedicated himself to an outer consistency. He takes his point of departure from an idea which in its primitive form is a sincere expression of himself. The next day looking deeper he perhaps discovers a new idea that cuts away the ground from under his former idea. But he is a practical man—he knows that this experience may be repeated every day. He therefore forces a consistency between the two ideas, and as the circle of his ideas tends to complete itself it curves farther and farther away from the touchstone of truth which exists in his own genuine perceptions. Thus he achieves a logical consistency; his work has a compact,

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finished, self-contained quality. But where is truth?

To finish—that is, to make finite. But the more one penetrates into the elemental order the more broken becomes one's utterance of it. Hence the wild and unrelated intuitions of Hebrew prophecy, the chaotic emotions of the lyric poet, and the final burst of art beyond itself—first into music, wherein the soul has despaired of rendering itself intelligible through the language of ideas, and ultimately into the pure ecstasy of religion wherein the soul is conscious of its complete harmony with the universal order.

I wish now in a few words to apply this conception to the French mind and to French literature.

I have spoken of Dante and Bunyan, men who applied to the social order the

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touchstone of a more elemental order, effecting thereby an altogether startling rearrangement of values. It would be difficult to place beside these a French name, at any rate since Rabelais, who was a Frank rather than a Frenchman. The French mind has concerned itself wholly with rearrangements within the social order. Contrast the Human Comedy of Balzac with the Divine Comedy of Dante, or *Télémaque* with the *Pilgrim's Progress*. The panoramic mind is there ; a mighty hand runs up and down the scales, but it strikes a clear, sharp note at either end of the keyboard. Pascal, it is true, plays upon an instrument whose strings are set in space itself, but his notes, which vibrate in the heart, are scattered notes : except by virtue of a certain tone he does not belong in the French programme.

More than any other people except the

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Romans from whom they descend the French have taken the world with complete seriousness, or, perhaps I should say, with such an assured sense of finality that they have been able to make of it a jest. "I am too good for this world," says Madame de Geoffrin, "but I do not know of any other." Observe the sharp outlines of this *jeu d'esprit*. A certain petulance jars it away from the positive but at the same time jars it back from the negative. Here is no room for the large, vague, wavering outlines of the spirit.

Hence religion, through which the mind apprehends the infinite, has been regarded in France almost solely as an adjunct to the social order. We see this not merely in its periods of orthodoxy, when the conservative forces of society are in control, but even when France is at the

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farthest remove from its normal self. "Soon," says a report drawn up under the Revolutionary Committee, "soon the religion of Socrates, Marcus Aurelius, and Cicero will be the religion of the world." The religion of Cicero! No religion at all, but morality, social order. Robespierre desires a restoration of the Catholic Church to enforce his new-found views of social order. "In Egypt," says Napoleon, "I was a Mohammedan: I must be a Catholic in France." In other words, religion in itself is nothing, but everywhere the established faith must be supported because "men require to be kept in order." Bonald, leader of the Bourbon reaction, passionately advocates a state religion to maintain the idea of authority, to him the safeguard of order. Here we have the French mind in orthodoxy, in revolution, and in Napoleon (a

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third principle in himself) manifesting itself in the same terms. At the farthest sally from its normal self it remains essentially the same.

It follows that the literature which springs from this mind will in turn be consecrated to order. It will have its own well-defined scale according to which the fittest shall survive. French literature has in its main current no writer of uncertain proportions. Descartes on the philosophical side opens it with a Discourse on Method, and method, concrete, practicable method, has been its unvarying demand. It accepts nothing which cannot make itself presentable. Thus it follows that French literature is so incomparably *successful* and has within its limits the most universal currency. It has its coins of copper, of silver, and of gold, coins of fixed denomination.

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Are they always redeemable at the bank of human nature? The golden stream flows by: but the vague soul, the uncertain soul, the chaotic, timid, awkward soul,—in a word, the human soul is a little afraid of it.

There are undoubtedly souls in such complete harmony with the order of nature as to be unfit for any least adaptation to the lesser scheme, unable to externalize themselves, to draw breath in the visible world. They evaporate in the hot sun of existence, they shrink from the contact of circumstances, they cannot accommodate themselves. In the freedom of nature they expatiate like a spirit-element. They lack the will, the mortal economy, to stop short, to crystallize themselves. The least barrier prevents them. They see everything—the whole fluid universe with its network

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of correspondences lies, well ordered, in their hearts. Under happy auspices and a favouring liberty these men become seers. Like a bird released from the cage they fly out through the concentric circles of systematic thought to space itself and wing their way fluttering about its confines where truth, goodness, and beauty trace their bright circumference.

In the Germanic world these natures have some scope. The elements themselves have tongues in Germany : for where society has not set limits the individual may do so. I do not wish to go deeply into that immense problem, the entrance of the Germanic spirit into France. "From 1780 to 1830," says Taine, "Germany produced all the ideas of our historic age : and for half a century still, perhaps for a whole century, our great work will be to think them out

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again." The *mal du siècle* was the earliest symptom of this influx, which time has hardily tempered. Robust souls have sprung from it since. Taine himself, Renan, and Zola stand for the second and third generation of this influence which has learned how to accommodate itself, to thrive and grow strong within limits. A certain pessimism is all that remains in them to mark the clipping of the German wings; but they are sufficiently sound and unafflicted. In the beginning it was different. The released soul capable on all sides of penetrating to the infinite found itself confined in France not only by the barriers of sense, the limitations of ordinary life, but by numberless local and factitious barriers, the social idea, the classical idea, authority in life and rhetoric in literature. . . . There was no

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place for the Blue Flower in this well-ordered garden.

Reading some little while since the Apocryphal New Testament, I was filled with a vague, intangible disgust by this pageant of baleful chastities, these obscene visions of obscure monsters, hippogriffs with hybrid names half-Oriental, wraiths and floating shadows of a perverted purity. How was I to reconcile these "pale sickly flowers of secrecy and shade" with the fair shining thoughts of the Gospel, the dayspring from on high? But I was reading the literature of the catacombs, I was in the presence of blossoms underground, covered by damp masonry, deprived of sun and wind, and festering there, a pent-up sweetness, distilling poison like that of the deadly nightshade.

If all art, even the most healthy, is

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pressed out of the soul by the limitations of life, if the artist wholly free in spirit would become silent like the clouds, how much more will he have to speak and how much less healthily under dictatorships like those of the Convention, the Empire, and the Bourbon reaction? A subterranean literature arises in France, that of the *émigrés*. Numberless works are produced under this repressive atmosphere—the catacomb literature of a new gospel. Sometimes, as with Lamartine, Benjamin Constant, Sainte-Beuve, only the youth is involved of strong-fibred men capable of dominating this ideal tendency in themselves and of producing in after life substantial work within rational limits. In the case of others it remains, aggravated and morbid, until, a wasting disease, it ends by destroying totally the springs of action. Such men

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are Sénancour, the author of *Obermann*, Maurice de Guérin, and Amiel. There are many others : I have chosen these.

Abnormal souls, whom the necessary compromise of life itself has made abnormal, they see nothing but the infinite and fall back upon existence with an immense weariness. "How wearisome is life!" cries Guérin. "Not in its accidents—a little philosophy suffices for that ; but in itself, in its essence, aside from all phenomena." "I have not given away my heart," says Amiel. "Hence this restlessness of spirit. I will not let it be taken captive by that which cannot fill and satisfy it : hence this instinct of pitiless detachment from all that charms me without permanently binding me : so that it seems as if my love of movement, which looks so like inconstancy, was at bottom only a perpetual search, a hope,

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a desire, and a care, *the malady of the ideal.*”

Composition, the ordering of thought, is alien to these men. S enancour writes a few inferior miscellanies; Gu erin struggles into verse, a few lyrics and one sublime fragment, the *Centaur*; Amiel produces with superhuman effort two or three essays and some newspaper articles. A great vision shatters them. They become fragmentary. They can express themselves only in the intimacy of personal confessions, unrelated, of which every sentence is warm, molten, malleable, without the alloy of rhetoric which gives form and currency to literary works. “Let the mind,” says Obermann, “strive to give a certain symmetry to its productions; the heart does not work, and can only produce when we exempt it from the labour of fashioning.”

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In their hands the journal becomes a kind of vicarious work of art—the work of art perhaps of souls in harmony with the universal. It endeavours to record the soul's impressions immediately without the brokerage of form, to give an expression to intuitions having the spontaneity of the intuitions themselves. "Life," says Amiel, "will always be a compromise between common sense and the ideal." So, let us add, will literature. Thence proceeds, both in life and literature, a certain impulsiveness, a quick heat, a fragmentary quality whether in conduct or art characteristic of natures sufficiently pure to express only what is to them absolutely real.

Obermann

I

PICTURE the Swiss valley as one finds it in any German romance. . . . Down the green hollows, up the green slopes, among the luxuriant vines the vintagers rejoice and sing. The hunter's horn re-echoes among the ravines : unreproved by the mild hand of the humanitarian. He climbs gaily above the rocks in pursuit of the little chamois. The remote châlet is murmurous with busy sounds. The bee-swarm sets the tune : honey from the bees, butter and cheese from the human beings there. All is productive, all is unconscious ; insect and man work together, and the extremes of

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creation intermingle and lose their distinction by the force of natural instinct. The milkmaid, deep-bosomed and ruddy, sings merrily among her goats. A young man meets her on the well-trodden path, planting his horn-tipped staff firmly among the buttercups whose white sides are blown up in the wind. He doffs the green cap, half in gallantry and more than half to show her the long gray eagle's feather picked up in the pasture above. . . . The sun sinks behind a transparent pinnacle, among rosy clouds. A shadow creeps across the village green, over the little inn, and begins its silent progress across the lake. The crickets and the old men tune themselves to the evening gossip, a distant bell rings out, the windows fly open; flute and fiddle, at first far-away, tentative, and wistful, strike into a quick tune. . . .

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Now into this German picture-book scene let us introduce a psychologist, a solitary student of morals, a reader of Plato. He has come to stay in the little white cottage among the vines, and at sunset he pushes away from shore in his tiny skiff and follows the advancing shadow across the lake. On the calm water he draws in his oars, under and over the stars reflected there and the luminous glow of the mountain. And there, face to face with the imminent universe, he embarks upon great dreams that seem as it were to dissolve the earthly part of him. Well has he chosen, as Rousseau chose, the Alpine solitude in which to review nature and man! where society has not laid its hands upon the soul, where the peasant's life has attained, or has not lost, something of pure happiness. Here, for once in the modern

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world, man is not oppressed with scruples; no cause, no plan, no laborious hope overwhelms him. Hardly set apart from the lower species, he lives and labours with the bees, the cattle, the goats, as they live and labour, to fulfil the same demands.

II

It is impossible to speak in English of *Obermann* and his creator without mention of Matthew Arnold. There is a certain pathos in that; the youth of Matthew Arnold is pathetic, and all his vain struggle for humility and freedom. There was a time when he was touched by the elemental truth that humility is the basis of all right perception. It was a great discovery in the complacent England of his day—so great a discovery

that Arnold with true Puritan conscience felt himself in duty bound to impart his discovery and to show how much more profound it was than the very conscience of which he was giving so bright an illustration. Forthwith the humility passed from his heart, where it almost made a poet of him, into his head, where it became a new Mosaic law. And that reproving, Addisonian hand of his thenceforward taught the truth which can only be lived, which has no validity as precept because it has the supreme validity as example. He succeeded in imparting that only which can be imparted: the modes and manners of truth, the *urbanity* of the soul—ignoring the law that urbanity is death when liberty does not precede and justify it.

Yes, it was liberty that Matthew Arnold never understood. He never understood

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the wise dictum that "art is the region of equals." True art, like true love, casts out fear. It is free because it is natural and because in it human nature expresses itself in all its delightful variety. Free souls know each other, speak to each other. . . . But how different it is when we have among us an intellectual missionary, a Matthew Arnold, who has not learned that human nature is nothing without its freedom, its personality, and is only tractable to those who approach it with a certain carelessness, a certain comradeship! . . . We are all terrified at once. For we are like children: we correct our bad manners by the example of good manners and by affection.

Is it so grave a responsibility to have an intelligence? Arnold, alas! thought so, and in this somewhat morbid responsibility he is peculiarly English. He thinks

Obermann

of other races as the mother of an ambitious and rising family thinks of other families. The French are those very superior and well-bred people who have been received at court. My dear children, always be polite to the French. As to those boisterous Americans, you can afford to hold your head high among them, etc. Meanwhile the young barbarians at home are not to forget the inequalities that surround them. He deplores the companions forced upon them by their position in society. Of the friends of Shelley he says, "What a set!" (This expression occurs in one of his letters.) It is a respectable phrase. Yet one asks, Is it possible that a man capable of using the expression "What a set!" in relation to Leigh Hunt and his circle, could have lived *sub specie aeternitatis* in the poet's world? To Arnold a relapse

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into freedom always implied the dropping of one's aspirates.

The limitation of Arnold's very great personal nobility of mind lay in his distrust of human nature, his perpetual sense of inequality in things, his preoccupation with the order of the mind rather than of the heart. The poet's world, swept by the free wind of nature, where inequalities level themselves and man is at one with trees and flowers in some transcendent order—this world he hardly entered. The rôle he chose was that of the Stoic, who wraps his mantle about him, patiently, wearily, without bitterness and without expectancy, and stands up nobly egotistical before fate. It is not strange therefore that he should have taken *Obermann* in this light and that he should have apostrophized him in the words of Achilles—

Obermann

“Greater by far than thou art dead ;
Strive not ! die also thou !”

That element without doubt plays its part in *Obermann*, makes it indeed justly comparable with an English work with which it may otherwise have been rashly compared, George Gissing's *Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*. Again and again I have noted this resemblance in tone, which echoes in a minor key and without defiance the loud fatalism of Henley's *Invictus*—

“Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the Shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds and shall find me unafraid.”

That Roman quality, that conception of antique virtue, exists in *Ryecroft* and *Obermann* alike, with this marked difference, that *Ryecroft* is the book of an old man looking backward, while *Obermann* is the work of a young man looking, though he

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is not aware of it, forward : a difference which makes this aspect of the latter work really episodic.

In both we see the projection of a set of ideal circumstances from lives remarkably similar. Gissing and Sénancour were alike condemned to the obscure life of hack-writers, the one in London, the other in Paris : Gissing had passed through years of it, Sénancour clearly foresaw that it was to be, as it became through forty years, his destiny. And each conceived himself, fortunate in a "modest competence," transported to the country solitude after his own heart, the one in the West of England, the other among the Alps. A grateful comfort abides in their peaceful cottages, "liberty from care, and repose in the place one loves," and withal a certain homely shrewdness, prudently expansive. Placed

Obermann

side by side, certain passages of each show that the parallel springs from a strange inward likeness. Of the Virtuous Man Ryecroft says :

“In his blood is the instinct of honour, the scorn of meanness; he cannot suffer his word to be doubted, and his hand will give away all he has rather than profit by a plebeian parsimony. He is frugal only of needless speech. A friend staunch to the death; tender with a grave sweetness to those who claim his love; passionate, beneath stoic seeming, for the causes he holds sacred. A hater of confusion and of idle noise, his place is not where the mob presses; he makes no vaunt of what he has done, no boastful promise of what he will do; when the insensate cry is loud, the counsel of wisdom overborne, he will hold apart, content with plain work that lies nearest to hand, building, strengthening, whilst others riot in destruction.”

Here is Obermann :

“The truly good man is invariable; he is a stranger to the passions of a clique and to all

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local customs ; he cannot be used as a tool ; he knows neither animosity, ostentation, nor excess ; he is not surprised at a good action, because he would have been the first to perform it, nor at an evil, because he knows that there is evil in Nature ; indignant at crime, he does not detest the criminal. . . . He is not the enemy of the superstitious, and he is without the contrary superstitions. He seeks rather for the origin, frequently based on reason, of innumerable opinions which have become insensate. . . . He is virtuous . . . because he is desirous of order. . . . He is not untrusting, but he is also not easily attracted. . . . He is not contented with what he does, because he feels that much more might be accomplished. . . . He lays down that the first merit is the unruffled rectitude of the good man, since it is that which is the most assuredly useful.”

Virtually that is the same ideal, the best in Stoicism. Yet striking as are these verbal and spiritual affinities, the essential notes are at variance, for the Stoicism of Ryecroft is complete, while

Obermann

that of Obermann, as I have said, is only episodic. This, I think, is the point which Arnold failed to grasp. He failed to see how much more fruitfully and constructively true of Obermann is the sentiment with which he concludes his essay on Marcus Aurelius, seeing in him all that is great in Stoicism, "yet with all this, agitated, stretching out his arms for something beyond—*tendentemque manus ripae ulterioris amore.*" For it is just here, in this agitation, this stretching out of arms, that the real problem of *Obermann* begins.

The Stoic endures, content with a kind of certainty in the relative things that surround him. That which is must be, inequalities not of his making are not for his remaking. He has at the same time all the cheerfulness of private virtue. He has the buoyancy of a man who has

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committed himself, who has faced the utmost possibilities of fortune, firmly, soberly, peacefully prepared and in a measure satisfied. I need not say how far this is from the immense weariness, the melancholy of *Obermann*, nor do I see in this melancholy

“the mournful calm ; serene,
Yet tinged with infinite regret
For all that might have been”—

the retrospection, the regret which Arnold ascribes to him. It seems to me that the crucial utterance of the book is precisely the reverse of this : “I am weary of the things that are certain and seek everywhere the paths of hope.” It is a kind of yawning gulf, an unfed heart, a soul which has not yet found its crown, looking forward, groping, searching, forlorn but not disconsolate. We cannot

Obermann

doubt this indeed when we know with what anxiety Senancour endeavoured to disclaim, to suppress the book after he had found himself and published his *Libres Méditations d'un Solitaire Inconnu*—as if it had been, not so much in itself as in relation to his own search, the half-negative, the wholly tentative beginning of an ultimately joyous pilgrimage. A hundred utterances of the later book show us that the personality has succeeded in rounding itself out, has achieved the full and gracious calm of the assured mystic. *Obermann* is the work of a man out of harmony with the order of the world; the *Méditations* the work of a man in harmony with the order of the universe. And it remains for us to note in *Obermann* the steps in this direction.

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III

Obermann, by some secret impulsion, has set himself to unlearn every lesson of the social man, who takes the human species as a touchstone. He has reduced himself to pure virtuality, and set before himself the reascension of the soul into the universal existence of pure spirit. His letters represent this critical, intermediate moment, at once of death and of rebirth, deprived midway of both worlds. They form thus doubly the book of an exile, an exile from the social order who for that reason perhaps is made the more conscious of his exile from the universal order. Doubly exiled and doubly fortunate! for the world which has proscribed him has also released him, and in becoming conscious

Obermann

of the universe—lost and astray though he is, how far from the goal!—he has found the beginning of wisdom and the first step in the divine initiation.

He no longer sees any but universal values, he has lost the sense of inequality and distinction which makes possible the social fabric: everything is neutralized. He demands independence of society and refuses to recognize any middle ground between the strictly individual and the strictly universal. It follows then that he cannot accept as his vocation any of those ready-made professions that spring from and support the social order. He turns to himself, takes stock of what resources may exist in him:

“I reflected that the true life of man is within himself, while that which he derives from without is only accidental and subservient. . . . Driven out of the mournful repose

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of my accustomed apathy, and compelled to be something, I became at length myself; and in these agitations, till then unknown, I was conscious of an energy, at first constricted and distressing, but with a kind of calm in its fullness which till then I had not experienced. . . . I reflected: let us before all be what we ought to be; let us take up a position which suits our nature, and then give way to the current of events, striving only to be true to ourselves."

He resolves, that is, to hold fast to nature by means of the only touchstone within reach, the sum-total of his own intuitions. Carried about as the world may have its will of him, he will not himself share the world's will by consciously choosing any of its pleasure or pain. And he resolves "to restrain those of his inclinations alone which tend to falsify his original disposition."

Obermann is the book of a man sus-

Obermann

pended, waiting. The final degree has not yet come upon him—that “abundant fall of rain” with which, as Saint Theresa says, “God himself undertakes to water the garden.” But the mysticism upon whose threshold he stands is not of the Catholic type. Just as he has put behind him the moral philosophy of the Stoics which sets man off sharply, as man, from the universal spirit, so now he puts behind him the mysticism that is anthropomorphic, that satisfies itself in concrete symbols and implies the existence on earth of institutions which enshrine truths in any way superior to the most common, the most natural intuitions. His mysticism is perfectly modern. It is harmonious with modern science ; and I see him at the outset of the century looking eagerly forward to the last words that science will have to say, embracing

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each vestige of discovery, rejoicing at each step which dethrones man from that base eminence, the false result of a lost link separating him from the rest of creation.

Maurice de Guérin

THERE are summer days when the heart is filled with a nostalgia for it knows not what, a dull anguish that is made up of little fragmentary sensations, unfinished fancies, the fragrance of memory, of love, and of regret. One seems to exist in sentiments which have not even the vitality to assert themselves. Words the most exquisite, words which contain even the most exquisite connotations, are too coarse for these little flowers of the mind which wither and die at the instant of birth and are too ephemeral to register their existence in any individual sensation of pain. Without reaching anything we seem to have outlived our-

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selves, and our thoughts are like little shadows cast by vague desires. We are like sea-shells that glance with sunlight, but contain within only the perpetual murmur of something unknown, distant, and sombre, echoes from the ocean of regret.

That, or something like that, seems to me the note of Maurice de Guérin.

I

Born in the little château of La Cayla in the Cévennes, he represents in his early surroundings the last attenuated fragrance of a feudalism four hundred years past its prime. His family, famous in the history of France and the Church, had preserved in poverty and solitude the gentlest piety, the most susceptible intimacies, a fervour altogether spiritual. The mother's early death added sorrow

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to this household of young children, the eldest of whom, Eugénie, at that time eleven years old and five years older than Maurice, instantly assumed the mother's place she was to fill so touchingly and for so many years.

The names of Maurice and Eugénie have grown together like two flowers on a single stem. She describes herself weeping over him as Monica wept over Augustine, and we can understand him better when we have grasped a little of her pervasive influence.

It was altogether devotional, in the Catholic sense. She recreates for us in its loveliest form the sentiment of the *Mater Dolorosa*. "I like the month of Mary," she writes, "and the rest of the pleasant little ceremonies the Church allows and hallows—ceremonies springing up at the feet of faith like flowers at the foot of an

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oak." Looking out on the world, which Maurice as a man is destined to enter, she compares it to an ocean covered with wrecked vessels—"Happy are those who have left it, who on a beautiful day have reached heaven!" And again, "The bird seeking the branch, the bee the flower, the river the sea, run to their resting-place. My soul, my intellect resembles them, O my God! seeking its flower and branch. . . . All that is in heaven!" She surrenders everything, even her talent: "I have given up writing poetry because I recognize that God does not ask it of me." Solitude has rendered her frail, sensitive, and almost clairvoyant. A letter from the outside world becomes with her a capital event, sets her fancies fluttering, stirs in her the gayest and most charming tendernesses. In solitude, she says, "ideas come which resemble

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nothing in the world, unknown, beautiful, like flowers or mosses." And in the overflowing of this nature, deprived of maternity, everything becomes indescribably childlike, winning, wistful; God himself becomes a kind of dream-child, the idea of which she fondles as in Italy they fondle the pink, waxen images of the little Jesus, only with an austerer, more mystical, less ruddy sentiment.

The family is very poor—the drawing-room is without a mirror, and they gather in the kitchen. A touching hospitality prevails there. The little old peasant women come to warm themselves at the fire, chattering gaily in their *patois*. The curé is a familiar friend. A child enters, unhangs the guitar, and listens to the singing of the strings. Three leeches float in a bowl on the mantelpiece, the water of which is piously changed every

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day. A dog is welcome, and the question arises, whether Polidor is not too lofty a name for him? . . .

II

That picture forms the setting of Maurice's childhood. On the terrace, under the blossoming almond tree I see him standing in silence, dreaming, at the hour of the Angelus. "I cannot," he writes in his *Journal*, "repress my longing for the sky where I should be, and which I can reach only by the oblique line of the human career." And in his long, eager walks, his visions of the desert and the wide ocean, he might have said with Shelley:

"I love all waste
And solitary places where we taste
The pleasure of believing all we see
Is boundless, as we wish our souls to be."

Maurice de Guérin

In his craving for the infinite, for the liberty of nature, Maurice was not in search of metamorphoses. He had no wish to be anything other than he was, but to become, in himself, identical with the universe, to float away from the finite, not into other finite forms, but into that which lies below them all. How he differs, for example, from Marie Bashkirtseff! Place side by side two utterances, characteristic of each. "If we could identify ourselves with the spring," he says, "force the mind to the point of believing that it breathes in all the life and love that ferments in nature! to feel one's self flower, verdure, bird, song, freshness, elasticity, pleasure, serenity, all at once!" . . . "I want," says Marie, "to be Cæsar, Augustus, Marcus Aurelius, Nero, Caracalla, the Devil, the Pope." Elsewhere she adds: "That is what comes

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of being vulgar oneself." Yes, that is the difference, Marie is vulgar. A creature herself, she is disappointed with herself: she perpetually longs to become other creatures. Her motive is external, almost envious, covetous. At the bottom of her discontent lie selfishness and pride. She is piqued, but she is not touched. It is all the difference between aspiration and ambition. With Guérin it is fundamental, selfless, disinterested; and his desire is not to be any other manifestation of nature, but to be at one with nature in all her manifestations.

This pantheism is of a type peculiarly Catholic which science has destroyed, or rather transformed. The study of nature has made plain to us that an all-embracing law reigns in the universe. We rest in that conception, to which we must needs accommodate our own ideas of justice,

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truth, and virtue. So long as there appeared to be something arbitrary in nature the conception of a universal order was necessarily factitious. Before we knew that in the long run virtue and all the properties of health prevail in the universe, men were only able to see that they do *not* prevail, immediately, in the world. And they invented heaven, the projection of this ideal from a world which of itself could not respond to it. Even now, when we have removed the supernatural scaffoldings of heaven and lowered that glorious architecture down to the world, the conception remains true symbolically which has become untrue literally. The *Divine Comedy* is not superseded by the *Origin of Species*, but interpreted by it. The "love that moves the sun and the other stars" remains the law of the universe. And because we see that the in-

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stinct by which every species perpetuates itself is the fundamental law, we see Christ in a new light, we understand that love is deeper than morality, and that our life is dignified in its identity with the life of trees, animals, and worlds.

The celestial régime of the Catholic Church contained thus a profounder truth than any which man had been able to reach until science brought him into actual, conscious touch with the absolute. It propounded a conception of infinite order in which the good, the beautiful, and the true right themselves and assume their fundamental proportions. I see in the Protestant episode of four centuries the struggle to attain science, the attempt to regulate the relations between the symbolic and the actual. But as every conception must be a makeshift which is

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founded upon anything less than absolute order, how can there be anything possible between pure symbolism in the Catholic attitude and pure actuality in the scientific attitude? Just there lies the weakness of Protestantism. There are moments when we turn fully and passionately to Rome, but at no time do we turn more than half-heartedly to Protestantism. Is not this because Rome entirely expresses the imaginative mood, while Protestantism only half expresses the mood of actuality and is only a lodging on the way? Symbolic or actual—we may have our preference, but it is the extreme in any form which wins our suffrage: that which enables us to feel we can reach out, reach out even though we may be reaching behind us, that we shall not continually hear the counsel, moderation, moderation. The “golden globe incontinent” has no

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more to do with moderation than it has with respectability.

No sooner do we touch the infinite order than we have an exulting sense of freedom. Think deeply of those superb Catholic symbols, the Madonna, the tempted Saint Anthony, the Dragon-slayer, wherein the human soul has expressed its aspirations and chagrins, and we understand how the world has felt the immense liberation of the Catholic religion, so rich, so human, so inflamed, so purgative. Who has not discovered in himself a dragon and a furious archangel? What artist has not felt that he lived in a Saint Anthony's cave: a baleful pageant hurrying by, monsters and imps, a voluptuous courtesan, toads and hippogriffs and seraphic virgins, disordered symbols of the real world seen through the insanity of detachment? Surely we

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have a right to form pictures of our profound instincts and, having done so, to give them names! At this discharge of our secret broodings a blithe spirit springs up in us. Hence the gay Catholic heart, the heart of Italy so free and childlike in the midst of poverty, disease, and old oppression: the songs of Petrarch, the pictures of Giotto, the acts of Saint Francis. The essential idea of the Catholic Church considered symbolically is precisely that of science. It reaches below ideas, personalities, philosophies, regards the spirit as but one of many manifestations and bases itself, one might almost say, upon the human body, the nervous and sensory organs which lie behind thought as they lie behind action. It enthrones itself in those caverns where even the most exquisite and remote conceptions of the spirit have their origin.

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III

How natural it was then for Guérin to have been led, or half led, into a belief in his religious vocation! After a deep and considerate study of history and philosophy and after one brief, unsuccessful attempt to establish himself in journalism, he went to La Chenaie and joined the group of enthusiastic young disciples gathered about the old prophet Lemenais, not yet separated from Rome, but already writing the sublime and arch-heretical *Words of a Believer*. In this retreat, so quiet, so studious, so filled with noble and affectionate graces, he had an opportunity to learn how far the object of his longings was spiritual liberty, the cultivation of the inner life for its own sake. Let us see how it affects him :

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“*Good Friday.* There is in me I know not what reprehensible spirit which excites great discontent, and drives me, as it were, to rebel against all holy offices and the collectedness of soul which are the due preparation for the great solemnities of our faith. We have been in special seclusion for two days and I have done nothing but grow weary, fretted with I do not know what thoughts, and even becoming irritated with the customs of the retreat. Oh, how well I recognize here the old leaven of which I have not yet purged my soul!”

How gladly he passes to those joyous and fresh descriptions of the visible world that have so amply, so unexpectedly to him, justified his existence :

“I have visited our primroses; each was bearing its little burden of snow and bending its head under the weight. These pretty flowers, so richly coloured, presented a charming effect under their white hoods. I saw whole tufts of them covered over with a single block of snow; all these laughing flowers, thus veiled and leaning one against another, seemed like a group of

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young girls overtaken by a shower and getting to shelter under a white apron.”

Again and again he returns to the sense of unfitness for life, partly the result of a real malady so soon to carry him away, partly of a failure to grasp his vocation :

“ Why vex myself by incessantly asking, what shall I make of my life? I have applied it to many things, and it has taken hold of none. With an apparent fitness for work I remain in a useless and passive attitude, almost without resource.”

Maurice was not, in fact, one of those whom life itself satisfies or who through faith can discover in life a vicarious completeness. The answer to his question would not have been so uncertain to one more accustomed to the intellectual and material matters of skill, concentration, industry, more capable of a noble compromise. For the truth is, though Maurice

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had barely time to guess it, he was in search not of the freedom of the spirit, but of art. After he had left La Chenaie and followed the suggestion of that "reprehensible spirit" and that "old leaven," he half discovered this fact, which in time would have cured his wavering melancholy and given him over to the difficult pleasures of creation and of sensuous and plastic forms. Had this not been so, he could not have given us that colossal fragment, *The Centaur*.

IV

I know no more interesting example than Guérin's *Journal* of the struggle of the artistic impulse to assert itself in minds naturally diffuse and of low vitality. The robust faculty of self-limitation, the power to say No! to the innumerable

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conflicting intuitions of a sensitive mind, is wanting in certain souls which are neither conventional on the one hand nor philosophical on the other. They lack the vital force of spontaneous creation. A profound unhappiness always accompanies in them a sensation of the beautiful, the interesting, or the picturesque. No sooner are they possessed with an idea than a phantom arises within them. It is the image of this idea composed of words, which takes form in the remote caverns of their heart. They can hear the imprisoned monster stirring far within. They hear it approaching along the passages that lead to their upper consciousness. It has already become a composition clamouring for permission to be born. . . . Each day a hundred impressions empty themselves within, of which only one can promise a delivered

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image. Hence that exhilaration and that fatigue arising from a never-ending expectation, by which they are like some vessel that is being perpetually filled and emptied and filled again and poured out, all the time growing, as it were, shabbier with use, use that leaves it utterly passive, a thing played with and tossed here and there. The world of realities, to most men so friendly and companionable, is to them like a lover which enslaves them in pleasure and pain. In this relation, in the midst of this chaotic melancholy, a fitful something asserts itself, a persistent force urges them to revolt, to grapple their elusive destiny and become the master of things.

“My God,” cries Guérin, “how comes it that my repose is affected by what passes in the air, and that the peace of my soul is thus given over to the caprice of the winds?”

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It is as if, when the birds had given him their song and the flowers their perfume, when history had offered him its tragedies and poetry its blithe purgation, they had hesitated in the moment of offering, discreetly adding this condition : It is not for us to crown a heart that nature has deprived of its freedom. The great mother is provoked with those rebellious children whose individual consciousness disturbs her brooding sleep. Awake ! Assert thyself ! but no longer expect to be perfectly happy. Taste thy little freedom and therein discover thy immense slavery. Discover that he only is truly free who has of his own will chosen slavery, and that submission is the price of peace. If, having learned that lesson, you shall at any time resign your pretensions and rejoin through sleep the unity of the unconscious universe,

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we will come to you then freely and illuminate your slumber like beautiful dreams. Sounds and colours, ideas, thoughts, and sentiments, we are the glad choir of the inner universal harmony. We reward nobody, we ask no reward, we exist as nature exists. Toward him who rebels we are in rebellion. Miserable estranged atom, it is not even given us to feel compassion for you. But since we are entirely passive we must needs permit you to violate us even where we cannot give you the sumptuous pleasure of our consent. Take us, therefore, as you can. Plunge deeply into the universal fountain. Drag us forth, trailing suggestions of the infinite, and crowd us into your poems and your pictures. There an image of us will remain to remind you for ever of our sublime essence, which escaped you and

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which a less presuming heart might have
possessed.

So nature speaks to the half-artist, who
is something less than man. But the
great mother does not dare to chide the
robust soul which is capable, like herself,
of creation.

Amiel

AMIEL was a true child of Geneva, and he had in him the inheritance of those three greatest of Genevese, Calvin, Rousseau, and Madame de Stäel. Like them he was Teutonic in soul, French in everything but soul. It was this racial conflict, peculiarly Genevese, which in him reached its tragical climax.

The Teutonic element appears in Calvin as an immense, brooding, fatalistic sense of destiny and sin ; in Rousseau as an all-dissolving sentimentality ; in Madame de Stäel as a type of Hegelian pantheism, half-sibylline. These are qualities of the inner disposition ; they proclaim fundamental origins which the French tongue

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and tradition have only succeeded in rendering paradoxical. And accordingly we see in Calvin the clear and skilful dialectician, in Rousseau and Madame de Staël the social and political reformer. All these qualities meet in Amiel, but without an external cause, without an object of devotion. In him the French and German influences sterilize one another. His whole existence is a state of mind, too lacking in passion, in development, in one-sidedness, to result in any *fait accompli*. Nowhere shall we find a more tangible illustration of the familiar conflict between the soul and its embodiment,—for in him the conflict is biological and springs from a fatal mixture of blood.

I

After passing through every phase of culture, after generating in himself by an

Amiel

almost universal sympathy the mood of the poet, the priest, the martyr, the invalid, the savant, the courtier, the soufi, the little child, the virtuoso, the mother—he remains through all and to the end, intellectually and spiritually, the orthodox Calvinistic Protestant. Everything reduces itself, he says, to the question of sin. That is what baffles his French critics, who expect a man of his intellectual experience to stand out finally with a positive rather than a negative doctrine. Well, clearly as we may and must more and more come to see the truth of Calvinism as an explanation of how things actually are in this world of election or damnation by heredity,—as a kind of *sociological programme*, that is,—on the spiritual plane it springs from an unfruitful egoism : the personal despair of a personal salvation, which presupposes an

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unnatural friction between the laws of human life and the laws of the universe. Surely no conception was ever so perfectly adapted to be the philosophy of men of action. All great men of action have been fatalists. Fatalism has provided them with so much the more grist for opposition, for conquest, for a dramatic purgation on the human stage. Alexander, Cæsar, Napoleon would not have risen to such magnificent heights if they had conceived their struggle to be with a mere world of men. Humanity alone, to them so contemptible, could never have produced in them such a grand fury. They felt themselves battling with the elements, they concentrated in the single-handed struggle of an individual against a species all the mad aspiration of nature to outdo itself, to suppress the weak, and then to suppress the strong, and the stronger,

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and the strongest. They felt themselves battling with destiny. But what is the spiritual mood of these supermen of action? Contempt for others, ennui in themselves. Napoleon was full of it. Cromwell was full of it,—Cromwell most of all, because with him it represented a reasoned programme, illustrated a philosophy, that of Calvin. But in the world of art and religion this philosophy and all its children fail. Because art and religion spring, not from opposition, but from acceptance,—they represent the delight of the spirit in free contact with the infinite.

For that reason Amiel's pursuit of the ideal, of the perfect universal freedom, had something pathological about it. It was the Calvinistic negation, raised from the social to the spiritual plane, which prevented him from seeing that certain of the simplest and most elemental functions

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of life are in themselves ideal, free because they spring from a glad acceptance of the laws of nature. Amiel felt that not only the expressions of being were limited, but being itself, because he conceived by hereditary instinct that some worm was at the core of things, that the ideal itself was tainted. Who does not know how the Puritan mind, even when most emancipated by study, by sympathy, by divination, by the purest and most spontaneous delight in things, can return to itself with a kind of cantankerous obstinacy! And Amiel was sufficiently a poet to take his colour, not from reason or from experience, but from the instinctive life of the heart which makes every poet the spokesman of an inherited mood.

Whether as a man, a poet, or a philosopher, Amiel was incomplete. One thing

Amiel

he chose wisely—solitude : his relations with the outside world were purely conventional, no task upon his energy. The solitude of Amiel had all the beauty of the truly contemplative life, a *feeding* solitude, active and responsive, where the world of nature and man was all the more imminent and suggestive, a solitude accessible to a thousand objects of intimate study, in which a special nature collects and matures its forces in the most abundant harmony with its own laws. But even then, after giving up the world, how much a man has to give up ! What are the laws of any nature ? Alas ! they are ill-defined and everyone has in him the beginnings of almost every type. And having given up the world, Amiel was unable to give up anything else. If great works, whether of intellect or character, spring from the passionate, single-minded

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cultivation of one grand, preponderant aim, if they are fed with emotion and have in them the ripeness and richness of a whole rounded and devoted nature, there has to be something monumental about the life they spring from, a gradual building and piling of one stone upon another, a proportion, a subordination. There has to be a point where one's division of interests, the scattering tendency of life, is brought up sharply by something inflexible, narrow, concrete. How few natures can, like Goethe's, build on many foundations and link them all together in a gigantic whole! How much intensity, how much character, what happy auspices, are necessary in this free, this unresisting universe, for the production of one small, worthy work! For Amiel, who believed he possessed the power to widen his ego until it became

Amiel

identical with the universe, who believed that he could identify himself with any fragment of the objective world—for Amiel, in reality, only the ego and the subjective existed. For him those numberless unfulfilled existences that make up the poet's life clamoured for actual embodiment. Unable to live disinterestedly as poets live in the lives of their creations, he desired, like Faust, to possess flesh and blood reality in a hundred different forms. Totally unable to submerge himself in conceptions, he sat like a spider in a kind of cosmic web spun from his own body, unable to find himself because he could not lose himself. He illustrates better than any other Hegel's description of the position of the artist in the modern world :

“The whole spiritual culture of the times is so embracing that he stands

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within this reflecting world and its relations, and cannot by any act or resolution withdraw from it."

How simple, how natural, how child-like beside this is the poet's gift, the poet's function! Simple, natural, childlike because it springs from a freedom that shares the life of men only and to the same degree as it shares the universal life, gathering not reflections, but emotional intensity. Burns describes it in

"The simple bard, rough at the rustic plough ;
Learning his tuneful trade from every bough."

And I know nothing more suggestive of it than Bede's description of the poet Cædmon, listening day after day to the reading of the Scriptures, and how, "ruminating over them like a pure animal, he turned them into most sweet verse."

Amiel

II

But Calvinism was not the only paralysing element. His French tongue was another—his affiliations and perplexing sympathies with the French.

During those long, gray, solitary years in Geneva the memory of his brilliant youth stood up, the student years in Germany, full of intellectual passion, the excitement of ideas, the thrill of an opening genius. They were the years during which a healthy talent, in any case, would have given itself over to acquisition. To him they represented—as no subsequent period could represent—an entire going-out from self. In Hegel, Schelling, and the whole intuitive philosophy he saw a kind of refuge, too soon lost. He was born for that *milieu*, he recognized in it, then by enthusiasm and afterward through

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regret, the opportunity of a healthy growth, a healthy production.

Born without question for philosophy of a special kind, he suddenly found himself bound to justify this tendency before his French public and his French friends. Read the judgments passed upon him by the latter, and by the aged Matthew Arnold, and you will see them all unite upon one point—that he should have made of himself a literary critic. Amiel knew that his true work was more fundamental, more synthetic than this. He felt, vaguely stirring within, a profound attitude toward life. He could not give himself to the creation of essays, the study of single works, single characters. To him the critic's function of appraisal appeared both fragmentary and presumptuous,—the literary formula too local, too limited, however elusive might

Amiel

be the universal formula of which he had fluctuating glimpses. No, much as he admired the French criticism, his heart was in philosophy. Cut off by language and environment from the immense reaches of German thought, he attempted a self-development in harmony with the French tradition.

He had before him the example of Renan. And of Renan I can fancy him saying : Is that the best France can do in philosophy ?—a man of immense learning, derived from Germany, who believes nothing in order that he may never be found in the wrong, who desires nothing but intellectual safety ? If only Amiel himself had never felt the need of intellectual safety ! If he could have trusted himself to be German, to be foolhardy to his heart's content ! If only he had not tried to justify himself before the French ! Of

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Renan he says : "Renan has a keen love for science, but he has a still keener love for good writing . . . and on this point I am very much with him, for a beautiful piece of writing is beautiful by virtue of a kind of truth which is truer than any mere record of authentic facts." That is a sufficiently fair and reasonable judgment for a literary artist, a critic, an essayist. But considering its implications in the case of Amiel, it seems to me a quibble, a piece of self-trickery. For is he prepared to follow Renan when the latter consistently preserves the same tone in the region of spiritual truth? Is he prepared to say, as Renan might have said, that beautiful writing here too is beautiful by virtue of a kind of truth which is truer than any mere record of authentic *sentiments*? I think he would have said, at this point, that truth does

Amiel

not require so many words to describe it.

Disillusion with Amiel does not, in fact, reach its logical extreme: style in this writer does not become the dominant note. That is because, in the presence of spiritual truth, human nature, the instinct towards happiness, his preoccupation ceases to be a purely intellectual one—at heart he is a poet. Human nature has, in short, its defence against the disillusioned intelligence which perceives everywhere futility, emptiness, and vain pretension. Writers like Renan, and more especially Anatole France, who have reached the final sophistication, sterilize all purely intellectual opposition and reply. But it can still be said of them, as Pascal said: "They have not risen from the order of thought to the order of charity." And Amiel says of himself:

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“Deep within this ironical and disappointed being of mine there is a child hidden,—a frank, sad, simple creature, who believes in the ideal, in love, in holiness and all the angelic superstitions.”

What is the distinction in tone? Like Renan, like Anatole France, Amiel says that he “contemplates the finite from the angle of the infinite.” Yet he does so without a touch of levity. The individual soul still has its weight, and is there, after all, anything in the universe greater than a conscious atom?

III

Amiel speaks continually of the illusion of his life. He says that men pursue illusion rather than truth, and he adds: “A little blindness is necessary if life is to be carried on, and illusion is the universal spring of movement. Complete

Amiel

disillusion would mean absolute immobility. He who has deciphered the secret and read the riddle of finite life escapes from the great wheel of existence ; he has left the world of the living—he is already dead. . . . What saves us from the sorceries of Maia is conscience. . . . In these Brahmanic aspirations what becomes of the subordination of the individual to duty ? Pleasure may lie in ceasing to be individual, but duty lies in performing the microscopic tasks allotted to us.”

It was this idea of duty which provided Amiel with an excuse for cheating his destiny, which kept him to his microscopic tasks, gave over this poet, born for sublime works, to the intricate and trifling virtuositities of translation. If the profession of teaching had been his true rôle, capable of involving his true energies, we should not have cause to regret that duty

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ruled the grand as well as the small issues of his life. Only in his last few weeks did Amiel rise above the compunction-philosophy, and only then, too late! was he prepared to accept illusion and to live, not in the universal reality, but in ideas and in affections.

If, too late for poetry, he had still released himself from the negative idea of duty in time to survive the release, it seems that he would have given himself over wholly to contemplation. He would have passed beyond the incessant compromise with literature and literary expression—which he always regarded as a weakness, having radically unfitted himself for it—and would have discovered in a state of entire passiveness, of entire silence, something like completeness. Who could have regretted this? We should have lost the *Journal*, it is true, and

Amiel

Amiel would probably never have existed for us. But it seems to me that, in considering books and men, there is always one great lesson a generous criticism wishes to derive : how far do they enlarge our conception of human destiny, how far do they increase the human scale, add to the number of ways in which personality can achieve itself? Criticism and history, have, like tragedy, their *katharsis*. They present, the one as regards individuals, the other as regards the race, the purgation of human life from its alloy, its obstructions. In history we see the whole species rising *en masse* from nature, asserting itself, winnowing itself, moulding itself ever more and more closely to the scheme of its own special aspirations. Criticism does the same *à propos* of special men, special works. Looking towards a final assimilation of

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all the perfections, it watches for each individual perfection.

Why is it so immensely satisfactory that such men as Plato, or Dante, or Goethe have lived? Because in their complete self-realization they are, so to speak, an earnest of the human faculty. Nevertheless they do not comprise the whole gallery, so full of unfinished pictures. They show us that the complete is possible—that is all. And just so far as any personality tends towards this completeness the range and the ideal of life are broadened. Life, we feel, ought to be of such a character that every personality can be free to realize itself. And it is only by the study of personality that we can understand the obstructions that exist in the world and the methods of removing them. The records of incomplete personalities are

Amiel

thus, in a sense, valuable—they are valuable as precepts. But more valuable than precepts are examples, and only the complete life is a true example. Literary expression is only one of the hundred ways by which personality projects itself beyond finite conditions and completes itself, so to speak, in the space that surrounds things. It lays the infinite under contribution, makes it complementary to the finite and gives personality the shadowy completeness through imagination which it would lack in subjective reality. The soul completes itself in many ways, but always through some such union of itself with the infinite. Just as Dante and Goethe are complete through poetry, so the seer is complete through contemplation. In both cases the infinite, as it were, comes to meet the finite, joins issue with it, and erases

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its limitations. That is why, in the case of Amiel, we resent the obstruction, the double obstruction,—a creed that prevented him from becoming a poet, a race that prevented him from becoming a seer.

IV

If—since everyone has chosen to use this word in relation to Amiel—if he had remained in Germany! He was not, as I think, one of those diffusive souls requiring limitation, who could have been, so to speak, trimmed into shape by the French atmosphere. He was, on the contrary, one of those diffusive souls who require only that their diffusiveness may be complete and may be justified. I see him, in later years, walking, as he often walked, in holiday tours, along the misty beaches of the North Sea, under the grey sky,

Amiel

listening to the slow lapping of the waves. It is an exile walking there! a drifting fragment of the Germanic soul dragged back year after year into the chattering Latin world. Yes, I do not doubt that if he had remained in Germany he would have found salvation after the manner of the Germans. That essentially fluid mind of his would have found a way, in the German tongue, to crystallize itself. Perhaps he would have produced a synthetic philosophy, based upon intuition,—in other words, the philosophy of a poet.

THE END

Note

The essays on *Amiel* and *Maurice de Guérin* appeared originally in *The Forum*; and have been reprinted here through the kind permission of the editor

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